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Another Nandigram in making

Rajasthan villagers say they'll die before they give up their land for power project

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"YOU CAN come and drop bombs on my village. Kill me," Bhanwar Singh, a 75-year-old farmer, thundered before government officials as his hands trembled violently. "That is the only way you can get my land!"

Grandfathers wept. Children lay down on roads. Everyone else in the Rajasthan village angrily told the carloads of government officials that no one would give what they had come for: their farmland.

Far removed from national attention, the next Nandigram is simmering in this border district of Barmer.



The Rajasthan government has planned to build the state's largest power project in partnership with private firm Raj West Power Ltd in the district's

Bhadres village. More than 20,000 acres of village land need to be acquired for the Rs. 5,000-crore, 1,000-megawatt project. Government officials began surveys this week to finalise compensation money for land acquisition - the last step in the process.

More than 60,000 people - and, more importantly, 250,000 livelihood-providing cattle - live across 29 villages in this area, and villagers are refusing to sell their land for any amount of money. They allege that the company, Raj West Power, is the real gainer, not the state or nation as the government argues, and certainly not the farmer.

The company refutes this, saying the project will generate huge job opportunities for the local populace.

But residents disagree. "Much of this



is agricultural land. It is being forcibly taken from us. We have been quiet and non-violent so far. But if this attitude continues, we will launch an agitation that will be the mother of Nandigram," said Ram Singh Bothiya, president of the anti-acquisition council, referring to the face-off between villagers and police in West Bengal.

The government has fixed the compensation for farmland between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 20,000 per bigha (1/4 acre) across villages, although farmers say the market price is at least Rs. 1 lakh per bigha at minimum market rates.

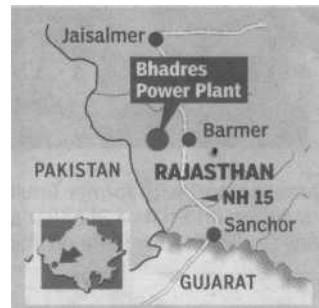
"This is not for our development. This project is for the development of one company," said Gobind Parbat Swa-

mi, a farmer. The 42-year-old is one of the hundreds of labourers who helped government excavators find coal in the region in 1994.

"Lignite, the required raw material, will be made available from the nearby Jalipa and Kapurdi mines," Raj West's mother company, JSW, said on its website. The catch: there are no mines at those sites. These are two of the names of villages that will now be destroyed.

Officials began visiting those villages on Monday, but have heard're-sounding "Nos" whenever they asked a villager whether he/she wanted to sell their land.

The confrontation is almost certain to escalate, but for now, there is a Russian Roulette over sharing blame for the



IN SEARCH OF LAND

RAJE GOVT is planning the state's largest power project in Bhadres village

20,000 ACRES of land has to be acquired for it

Bothiya Jagir villagers (left) during a discussion with government officials.

land acquisition tangle.

"The land is being acquired by (government-run) RSSML. The company has nothing to do with this process," said Upendra Singh, a director of Raj West.

"The interface with the public over land acquisition will be done by the district officials. Kindly talk to the district administration, not us," said Alok, managing director of RSSML.

But even in the midst of this, niceties have not been forgotten. "I am not your enemy, I am your servant," the revenue official told the crowd in Bothiya. "Please have tea, don't return without having something to eat," said an elderly voice in the crowd that surrounded the officials. "But we won't give you our land."

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